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"A Fusion of Eastern and Western Philosophies to Plan Tomorrow's Schools"

## Fresh Perspectives, October 2004

"As for the buildings in which our children are educated, it is safe to say that their design has not kept pace with the significant changes in the world of education." —  
Prakash Nair

### "A Fusion of Eastern and Western Philosophies to Plan Tomorrow's Schools"

by Prakash Nair

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As globalization brings world communities closer together, it also exposes many differences and distinctions that mark eastern and western societies. The world of education is no different in this regard. As western education establishments begin to take a hard look at redefining the very foundations of their industrial education model, they are becoming more open to incorporating many inherently eastern characteristics.

What is happening in the highly conservative world of western medicine offers clues to the direction in which western education is moving, albeit slowly. Western medicine is now more



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open to eastern ideas of mind-body healing, acupuncture, ayurvedic and other “alternative” remedies. This marks a significant departure from an approach that had previously focused, single-mindedly, on healing the disease to one that is more holistic and focused on healing the whole person. Similarly, in education, there is a growing awareness that we don’t just “educate the cognitive brain”. In other words, there is now an increasing acceptance that education is not only about intellectual development but also about human development.

*Image: Outdoor learning – an Eastern Tradition Combines with Modern Technology at the Pathways World School in New Delhi, India. Planner: Fielding Nair International. Photo: Randall Fielding.*

This is hardly a new idea in the east where the traditional gurukul focused as much on imparting knowledge as building individual character. Similarly, other eastern mainstays like yoga and meditation are now entering the western mass consciousness for their potential educational value and their whole-person approach to emotional and physical fitness.

It helps that western researchers are themselves confirming that the industrial, mass-production model of education is no longer relevant in a knowledge economy. In fact, an argument can be made that we are now in the post-knowledge economy where knowledge itself is simply another global commodity. In this world the new currency is creativity. And nurturing creativity starts with the acceptance of the notion that not all students will learn the same things in the same way in the same time increments. This notion is backed up by solid research that bolsters the argument for more individualized learning.

Howard Gardner’s teachings have always made a strong argument for adopting the more eastern approach to learning. For almost twenty years since Gardner’s formal identification of multiple intelligences, western educators have attempted to incorporate learning experiences into the curriculum that build more than verbal and logical/mathematical skills. We now know that school is a time to nurture social, emotional, artistic, and bodily/kinesthetic qualities in students because these “intelligences” play a very important role in a person’s success in life. However, today’s schools and school buildings are not doing enough to nurture each student’s full potential in these various areas of development.

When I was approached to help conceptualize a “world class” school in New Delhi, I saw it as an opportunity to respect the inevitable forces of globalization that is breaking down nationalistic and communalistic boundaries. But I also saw it as an opportunity to marry centuries’ old



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eastern education philosophies with the rigor and structure of the western education model. What evolved is the Pathways World School set on 30 scenic acres in Aravali Hills near New Delhi.

*Image: Learning Street – A Western Notion Borrowed from “Main Street” - at the Pathways World School. Photo: Randall Fielding.*

I suggested the name “Pathways” to represent the multiple Pathways to learning that are available - and how each individual walks a different Pathway of learning during the course of his or her life. The term Pathways reinforces the idea that it is the Path that one takes in life and the manner in which that path is traversed (the journey) that matters most - and not the destination itself. Pathways will seek to imbue in students an appreciation for living - all the stuff that happens between life’s milestones. This is a very eastern, almost spiritual, way of looking at learning. For this reason, the Pathways concept is one that is easily digestible in the east, but more difficult for the west to conceptualize.

The strong goal orientation that made the west so successful during the industrial revolution goes hand-in-hand with a linear thought process. It is a thought process that sees raw material going in one end and a finished product emerging from the assembly line at the other end. If this can happen with products, why not with children?

The answer lies in the fact that every research study conducted over the past twenty years confirms that “learning” is not about memorizing content but about developing skills for living. In other words, the subject matter on which so much emphasis is placed in schools is in fact the least important aspect of learning. By extension, the school itself, which is often nothing more than a mass-production “factory” to indoctrinate children with facts and figures so they can do well on standardized tests, is an anachronism in today’s world.

As for the buildings in which our children are educated, it is safe to say that their design has not kept pace with the significant changes in the world of education. Despite the success with Pathways World School, I see that the rest of India has abandoned its own spiritual heritage to blindly follow a failed western model of mass production. But India is hardly alone in this area. School design everywhere in the world lags behind the research in education because of the rigid programs that architects inherit from the school establishment, a lack of imagination on the part of the designers themselves and a fear of failure with “outside the box” solutions. Because everyone has a preconceived idea about what a school should look like, architects are reluctant to “experiment” with innovation.

Despite the setbacks that have held back educational architecture, it is my hope that the essential ideas behind the Pathways World School of respecting the individual learner and developing the whole person – ideas that western researchers have now endorsed, can migrate to even the most humble institution of learning.

All of us, in the end, are stakeholders of education. What happens in education today will affect the world in which our children will live tomorrow – and that world will not be about east or west but about the things that unite as all as people.

\* \* \* \* \*

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